

SWAHILI LITERATURE: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin this address by contextualizing Kiswahili within the African linguistic terrain. Some linguists put the number of languages spoken in the world at about 7,000. Roughly, a third of these languages is spoken in Africa (see, for example, Gordon (2005)). The approximately 2,000 languages are grouped into four language families, namely, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic and Khoisan (Greenberg, 1963).

One of the members of the Niger-Congo family is the Bantu sub-family. This is the sub-family to which Kiswahili belongs. Specifically, Kiswahili belongs to a group of Bantu languages called Sabaki due to their origin within the River Sabaki region. Other Sabaki languages, that is Kiswahili's closest sister languages, are Kipokomo and the Mijikenda languages. The long and short of what I have said so far is that, when we speak of Swahili literature, we are talking of the literature of an authentic African language. Kiswahili is not any less African than Akan, Bambara or Acholi. It is not any less Bantu than isiZulu, Chiluba or Kikamba. However, it is a unique African language in that, unlike all the other African languages, it has a staggering number of speakers. It is estimated to have between 100 million and 140 million speakers. It not only by far the largest language on the African continent but also one of the biggest in the world in terms of both the number of speakers as well as regional spread.

Talking about Kiswahili and its literature necessarily forces one to engage in debunking some misconceptions both explicit and implicit. One of the misconceptions is on its correct identity with which I have already dispensed. Another misconception is on its literature. In a *Sunday Nation* article titled "The Other Half of Our Writing That You are Probably Missing" Dr. Thomas Odhiambo makes an observation that, "If you asked a literary scholar from East Africa

to tell you a brief history of the region's literature, they will invariably speak only of literature in English. They will speak about the birth of East African literature as the moment when — I guess — Ngugi wa Thiong'o published *The River Between*; or when some other author published an anthology of poetry or a play in English”

Dr. Odhiambo's observation brings to the fore the unfortunate lack of knowledge with regard to Kiswahili literature and its place in the East African literary landscape. Without batting an eye lid, we tell students in our secondary schools and universities that writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Grace Ogot, Okot p'Tek and Taban lo Liyong' constitute the first generation of East African writers. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

By the time the above writers penned their works, written Swahili literature had been in existence for centuries. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* was published in 1964. Arguably, the manuscript was not in existence much earlier than one or two years before the date of publication. It was therefore written more than three hundred years after the scripting of *Hamziyya* by Sayyid Aidarusi on the Lamu Island in 1652 (Knappert, 1972). Put differently, Swahili literature predates literature in English in East Africa by more than three hundred years.

Lest we mislead ourselves that the writing of *Hamziyya* was a one-off affair, let me to point out that classic Swahili poetry has been thriving since that early work. One of East Africa's early female writers, Saada Taji li Alifina wrote her poem in 1790 (Knappert, 1972). Mwana Lemba, another female poet also wrote quite early in the evolution of Swahili poetry. One of the best known female poets in Swahili poetry, (best known, of course by scholars and students of Swahili literature), is Mwana Kupona who wrote her hugely popular *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona* in 1858 (J.W.T. Allen, 1971). Therefore, to tell students in a university literature hall that Grace Ogot, Charity Waciuma and Martjorie Oludhe Macgoye are the earliest female writers in Kenya is to misinform them. Indeed, by the time Grace Ogot read her short story titled, “A Year of Sacrifice” at the well-known conference on African literature at Makerere University in 1962, Saada Taji li Alifina had written her poem translated as “Saada's Lament” more than one hundred and seventy years earlier (taking Knappert's dating of the poem's writing as valid).

There are many other prominent Swahili poets of yore. Among them are Sayyid Abdalla Ali Bin Nasir, the composer of the famous poem titled *Al-Inkishafi* (which happens to be one of my favourite East African poems). Muyaka bin Haji, the formidable Mombasa poet, who was born in 1776 and lived until 1840, was a prolific poet and he left us with a literary treasure which was

published posthumously as *Diwani ya Muyaka*. Some of his poems have been enthusiastically and ably critiqued by Mohamed Abdulaziz in his study titled *Muyaka: 19th Century Popular Poetry*. Other poets of the classical period in Swahili literature include Mwalimu Sikujua, Zahid Mghumi, Ahmed Al-Mambasi and Ahmad Basheikh Hussein. These poets wrote poetry that was not only socially relevant, deep in reflection but also aesthetically impressive. The poetry of these early poets, which was written using Arabic alphabet, is today available in the Roman alphabet and interested readers can access it without much difficulty.

After the introduction of the Western form of education in East Africa and with it the Roman alphabet, Swahili literature beat literature in English at the printing press by a whole three decades. James Mbotela's novel, *Uhuru wa Watumwa*, was published in 1934, exactly thirty years before the publication of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* in 1964. And, it's not just in poetry and fiction where Swahili literature predates literature in English. The same is true of drama.

Many people are familiar with East African dramatists writing in English such as John Ruganda, Francis Imbuga, Robert Serumaga, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Austin Bukonya and David Mulwa. However, writing and publishing of drama in East Africa started, not with the English language but in Kiswahili. In 1957, Graham Hyslop published *Mgeni Karibu* and *Afadhali Mchawi*. 1957 was the same year that Henry Kuria published *Nakupenda Lakini*. In 1961, Gerishon Ngugi published *Nimerogwa Nisiwe na Mpenzi*. Ngugi wa Thiongo's first play, *The Black Hermit*, was published in 1970, that is more than a decade after the publication of drama by Graham Hyslop and Henry Kuria.

I have demonstrated that (written) Swahili literature is about four centuries old or, to be precise, 370 years if we use Knappert's date of Hamziyya's birth. That is a long literary tradition. However, one can legitimately point out that longevity of a literary tradition is one thing and that the quality of the intellectual products thereof is a different matter. To address the issue of the quality of Swahili literature, let me deal with its thematic concerns and relevance before looking at its other aspects including aesthetic accomplishments. Among the themes found in classic Swahili poetry is faith, especially, Islam. One of poetic works with the theme of Islam is Hamziyya which I have already mentioned as the earliest known piece of written Swahili literature. Other works that deal with religious themes either wholly or in part include *Al-Inkishafi*, *Utenzi wa Tambuka*, *Utenzi wa Paa na Ngamia*, *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona* and *Kasida ya Burudai*.

Regarding secular themes, it has often been stated that Muyaka Bin Haji Ghassaniy took Swahili poetry from the mosque to the marketplace. This claim, which has been put forward again and again, is erroneous. True, Muyaka wrote on political, economic and social issues. However, many of the secular themes with which he dealt had been handled by poets before him

Fumo Liyongo, who lived much earlier than Muyaka, composed virtually all his poems on secular issues including matters such as weddings, hunting and love. Compositions such as the “Wedding Song”, “Song of Love”, “The Song of Sada”, “Ode to Mwana Munga” and “The Serenade to the Coconut Girl” are good illustrations of his secular poems.

Fumo Liyongo is also reputed to have composed powerful political poems. They revolved around his life and his contestation for power apparently with a king or a prince in Pate which in his days was already a main centre of political power. In “Wanji Wanji”, we learn that Fumo Liyongo was a man who would choose to die rather than accept oppression and humiliation at home. He was the kind of person who was willing to fight for honour; a man against whom no scornful word would be uttered against him as long as he lived. He feared nothing but disgrace which would result from his enemies seeing his back as he is fled. Due to his firm stand against oppression and humiliation, we see both of his feet in shackles and an iron ring around his neck as a political prisoner. That’s politics – very serious politics indeed!

Saada Taji li Alifina’s poem, estimated to have been composed in 1790, is about challenges she has encountered in her marriage. In the composition, the persona, who also happens to be the poet herself, laments about her mistreatment by her husband. She was married, we learn, when both of her and her husband were young. She has done all that a wife is expected to do in the cultural context of her marriage. As a wife, she is expected to massage and caress her husband. She does as much. She has neither spoken to him a single word of contempt nor done anything that would be considered an act of rebellion. She has always been humble and obedient. In spite of all this compliance, the husband is very angry with her and he is suing for divorce. He has stopped going to her apartment and has gone as far as taking away her bride wealth as well as her regular sustenance. As a result of her husband’s unprovoked and cruel behavior, she is hurting badly. The second to fourth stanzas of her “Lament” go as follows:

Naliozewe na mume
wa tangu utoto wetu
kwa idhini ya wamame

na baba na wangu watu

kame siino ni ngome

isiongiwa ni mtu

Kipata siku ya tatu

Kamwe kawa metukiwa

Sikwima, siwasilepo

kukanda na kupapasa

kwa mume siambilepo

neni iwi la kukusa

wala simtendilepo

la unashiza kabisa

Nali mwenye, ni mwangusa

Nimtiye muowa

Sasa ali awiile

haji hapiti nyumbani

na mahari atwazile

hata poso za zamani

wambije sayu matule

yaniliza-mimoyoni

Si moja 'kaweka ndani

Si mawili 'katukuwa

Although *Al-Inkishafi* is considered a religious poem with some scholars going as far as seeing it as religious sermon (Hichens, 1972), it is quite revealing on the politics of Pate of the day. For instance, it shows how the politically powerful and materially well-to-do lived. For them life was smooth – very smooth! They had fame and honour. They were not only contented but also

conceited. They walked with their heads slanted to one side. Their houses were lighted and glittered brightly. Nights went by like days. They had chinaware and engraved goblets. They slumbered in beds with pillows for both their heads and feet. Moreover, they had people to message and fan them and beautiful, elegantly-dressed women who continuously sang soft, sweet songs as they retired to bed.

The poem mentions ministers and other big men who were guarded, yes guarded, by soldiers. The poem also mentions judges. However, in spite of their splendor and comfort, their lives come to naught. We read:

Kwalina Mabwana na Mawaziri

Wenda na makundi ya askari

Watamiwe nati za makaburi

Pingu za mauti ziwafundiye

Kwalina makadhi wamua haki,

Wahakiki zuo wakihakiki

Waongoza watu njema tariki

Wasewe kwa wote waitishiye

The earliest Swahili fictional work is the historical novel by James Mbotela which was published in 1934. Mbotela's work is on slavery and, arguably, the only literary work in East Africa on the subject. James Mbotela, the author, was a son to Mambo Mbotela who suffered the indignity of East African slave trade. Mambo Mbotela was captured as a slave and suffered and witnessed first hand the tribulations and humiliation that faced those who were unfortunate to be within reach of the captors. The senior Mbotela narrated to James Mbotela what he had gone through and what he had witnessed and James Mbotele added creativity to the narration to come up with the artistic work titled *Uhuru wa Watumwa*. Consequently, the novel become the first and the last East African literary work to deal with the theme of slavery.

In 1957, Graham Hyslop published two plays, namely, *Afadhali Mchawi* and *Mgeni Karibu*. *Afadhali Mchawi*, is the first literary work in East Africa to deal with the theme of corruption. In the play, Issa, one of the characters, is a nurse of the level of a "dresser", that is someone who dresses wounds in a medical establishment. Issa has access to medicines in his workplace. He

tells Ali, another character that he, Issa, makes money on the sidelines over and above getting a salary. He makes the extra money by selling drugs meant for the medical facility's patients. Issa is, therefore, clearly engaged in acts of corruption (Mugambi, 1982). Corruption is essentially a moral issue. It is a manifestation of moral decay. Consequently, *Afadhali Mchawi* is the first portrayal of moral decadence, a portrayal that is so prevalent in East African literature in both Kiswahili and English.

Shabaan Robert whose works became widely known in 1940s, 50s and 60s and whose works became mainstream reading texts thereafter, dealt with many themes including social issues, governance and values. In *Utubora Mkulima* the writer explores and advocates for "utu" a notion that in Southern Africa goes under the label "ubuntu" and which has become a major religious, philosophical and political concept seen as capable of addressing societal challenges not only in Southern Africa but also on the whole of the continent of Africa.

Decadence in society is one of the most widely and intensely dissected issues in Swahili literature. It has been explored by writers such as Shabaan Robert, Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed and Said Ahmed Mohamed. At the beginning of *Asali Chungu*, Said Ahmed Mohamed's novel, we encounter women seated on a bench in the District commissioner's waiting room. We learn of the dereliction of the duty of the occupier of the office. We are informed he enters the office, walks out for tea, gets back to the office, walks out to smoke, comes back and goes out again. He displays terrible indifference and insensitivity towards the people he is paid to serve. By the end of the day, he will have attended to only four people. And the four will not be just anybody. The lucky ones, if it can be called luck, are women endowed with attractive bodies. And there is much more than official business that goes on in the office. In the opening scene of the novel, after a multitude of women have spent an enormous amount of time waiting in the District Commissioner's reception, the person who has been in the office finally emerges. And as sure as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, it is a young woman. She is described as someone soaked in pretentious embarrassment. Her eyes are blood-shot and her hair ruffled. That kind of appearance of a young woman who has been in a room with a man for hours, leaves little to the imagination of those who have been waiting on the bench!

Since the days of Fumo Liyongo's compositions, through Sayyid Abdallah Ali Nasir's *Al-Inkishafi* and Muyaka's poetry up to the present, political commentary has been a persistent feature in Swahili literature. In recent times, writers such as Abdillatif Abdalla, who authored *Sauti ya Dhiki (Voice of Agony)* while incarcerated by Kenyatta's government, have written

biting pieces on unenviable political wilderness of their times. Other works with prominently political themes comprise *Kusadikika* and *Kufikirika* by Shabaan Robert, *Mafuta* and *Walenisi* by Katama Mkangi, *Kilio cha Haki* and *Chembe cha Moyo* by Al-Amin Mazrui, *Kinjeketile*, *Mashetani* and *Harusi* by Ebrahim Hussein, *Kichwa Maji* and *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* by Euphrase Kezilahabi, *Kuli*, *Kasri ya Mwinyi Fuadi* and *Hatia* by Shafi Adamu Shafi, *Dunia Mti Mkavu*, *Sikate Tamaa* and *Kina cha Maisha* by Said Ahmed Mohamed and this presenter's poetry including *Mchezo wa Karata*, *Bara Jingine*, *Msimu wa Tisa* and *Mvumo wa Helikopta* as well as his drama such as *Kifo Kisimani* and *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi*.

By the time the Zanzibar revolution took place in 1964, the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba were already witnessing the development of a kind of later-day feudal system. It is that unequal social, political and economic set-up that created the fertile ground for the Okello-led uprising. The emergence of the feudal system and the economic and social ills it birthed is the subject of fictional works such as Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed's *Nyota ya Rehema*. The novel opens with peasants bringing harvest to a feudal lord who has allowed them to use his land on a share-cropping basis. The novel opens as follows:

“Baba, baba, wakulima wamekuja”. Salma alikuwa akipiga kelele huku akipanda vidaraja kuelekea ndani. Fuadi, kijana mmoja mrefu, mweupe, mwenye sharafa ya ndevu ndogo ndogo, aliyevaa kanzu nyepesi ya darizi, na kofia ya viua vya lasi, alichungulia dirishani, tabasamu ikatokeza katika uso wake wenye haiba. “Ah, vizuri”, alisema kuwaambia wakulima wapatao darizeni walioleta gunia na vipeto vya mazao yao, zawadi kwa bwana shamba.

The earliest work of Swahili literature to engage the theme of gender and specifically women rights and emancipation was Shabaan Roberts' *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad (The Biography of Siti binti Saad)*. The biography celebrates the self-confidence, determination, focus and courage of Siti binti Saad, who rose from humble beginnings to become a famous taarab singer not only in Zanzibar but in the whole of East Africa and beyond. Siti was born of poor parents in the village of Fumba where, as a girl and a young woman, she made and sold pots, a practice she learnt from her mother who was a potter. Siti had neither physical attractiveness nor education. However, she discovered that she had a beautiful voice. She voluntarily moved to Zanzibar town to hone her singing skills and grow a career in taarab music. She succeeded in the twin dreams and ended up being a popular performer who entertained lovers of music far and wide including performances outside Africa. Through the biography, Shabaan Robert was able to demonstrate

that a woman can succeed in life through her own determination and without having to bow down to men.

Other works that handle the theme of women's rights and dignity include *Kilio cha Haki* by Al-Amin Mazrui, the plays of Penina Muhando, poetry and fiction by Said Ahmed Mohamed, and this presenter's play titled *Natala* as well as his numerous poems especially in an anthology titled *Bara Jingine* translated into English as *Another continent* as well.

Emerging themes such as the need for environmental protection have also found their way into Swahili literature. This presenter has published numerous poems on the advocacy of a healthy environment.

Finally, on the issue of themes in Swahili literature, there is the topical and vexing issue of human rights. Presumably, one of the world's longest poems on this subject is this presenter's 126-page composition titled *Doa (Blemish)* that dissects different aspects of human rights violations. The poem is inspired by actual life occurrences in a country which, in the poem, remains unnamed and which I still do not intend to name in this address.

Swahili poetry has been going through changes since its genesis in the days of *Hamziyya* in 1652. Some of the changes that have taken place have sparked controversies. I am aware that changes in the literatures and other art forms in other societies have sometimes led to controversies and that, therefore, controversies are nothing unusual in the arts. Be that as it may, controversies revolving around changes in the form of Swahili poetry have been intense and even emotive. It is, therefore, my considered view that to not address the twin issues of changes and controversies in the form of Swahili poetry would do the listeners of this address a disservice.

The repetitive, rigid and predictable rhyme and metre form in Swahili poetry was introduced into the Swahili community in mid-17th Century through the composition of *Hamziyya*, a composition that was modeled on an older poem written in Egypt by Abu Busiri in the 13th Century.

The original poem in Arabic by Abu Busiri had rhyme and metre in its four hundred stanzas on the biography of Prophet Mohamed. *Hamziyya* by Sayyid Aidarus bin Uthaima was modelled on the Arabic poem complete with similar rigid rhyme and metre. Due to the prestigious position of matters Islamic in the Swahili community and the popularity of *Hamziyya*, rhyme and metre become not only highly valued and fashionable but also entrenched in the higher echelons of

society. Henceforth, the rigid rhyme and metre form became the benchmark to be adhered to by poets.

Many famous works of poetry were thereafter written using the rigid form. These works include long poems such as *Utenzi wa Inkishafi*, *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona* and *Utenzi wa Paa na Ngamia*. Poets composing short poems also used rhyme and metre. Among these poets are Zahid Mghumi, Mwengo bin Athman and Muyaka bin Haji.

In the 20th Century, the rigid rhyme scheme and metre poetry was exemplified by works of poets such as Mathias Munyapala, Shaaban Robert, Kaluta Amri Abedi, Saadan Kandoro, Ahmad Nassir (Juma Bhallo), Abdilatif Abdalla, Boukhet Amana and David Massamba. This form of poetry which has been referred to as “ushairi wa kimapokeo” or “ushairi jadi”, that is, traditional poetry, has lines containing the same number of syllables per line, is rhymed in the middle and at end of the lines and stanzas have equal number of lines and each stanza is organically self-contained and, therefore, whole.

Beginning in the early 1970s, a new generation of poets represented by writers such as Euphrase Kezilahabi and Ibrahim Hussein started writing what is today called “ushairi wa kisasa” (modern poetry) or “ushairi huru” (free verse). Kezilahabi’s *Kichomi* is a landmark anthology in this regard. So is Hussein’s poem titled “Ngoma na Vailini” which is so well-known and popular that it is the name of a bi-annual literature conference at the University of Naples (L’Orientale) in Italy. Other poets who have written “ushairi wa kisasa” include M.M. Mulokozi and K.K. Kahigi, who co-authored *Ushairi wa Kisasa*, Al-Amin Mazrui who wrote *Chembe cha Moyo* and this presenter. The early 1980s saw the emergence of “Ushairi Picha” (Concrete Poetry) by this author. The poetry first made its appearance in published version in a literary magazine called *Mwamko* (Awakening) which was a platform of the Chama cha Kiswahili cha Chuo Kikuu cha Nairobi (CHAKINA), an organization of the University of Nairobi students especially those studying Kiswahili.

Later, “ushairi picha” was featured in a number of anthologies including *Mchezo wa Karata*, *Bara Jingine*, *Msimu wa Tisa* and *Rangi ya Anga* all by this presenter. During my trip to Dodoma, Tanzania in 2017 for a conference organized by Chama cha Kiswahili cha Afrika Mashariki (CHAKAMA), a young Tanzania poet, wearing a face bright with contentment, gave me an autographed copy of his “shairi picha” anthology. (It’s such a shame that I cannot locate the copy in my study so as to mention the poet by his name).

“Ushairi picha” uses visual or graphic images as a device of composition. The poetry still uses other devices of language manipulation. In other words, just like other forms of poetry, it uses what is widely referred to as poetic language, that is, language that has been creatively manipulated for poetic effects. As we are aware, that language uses devices such as imagery, metaphors, similes, personification, paradox and rhetorical questions. Just as in the “ushairi wa kimapokeo”, “Ushairi wa kisasa” (modern poetry) and “Ushairi picha (concrete poetry) use compositional devices such as those that I have mentioned. In addition, “ushairi picha” uses visual graphic images as additional compositional devices. As a poet, I can confirm that a graphic image is a formidable foregrounding device.

The emergence of “ushairi wa kisasa” was strongly opposed and vilified by the “wanamapokeo”, that is, the proponents of traditional Swahili poetry. Writers of “ushairi wa kisasa” and their supporters did not take the opposition and vilification lying down. They defended as valid the new form of poetry. The divergent and diametrically opposed views of the two groups, that is, those against “ushairi wa kiasa” and the proponents of the new form brought about, arguably, the biggest debate ever witnessed in the whole of Swahili literature.

The arguments advanced by the opponents of “ushairi wa kisasa” included the claims that, to be a Kiswahili poem, a composition must have:

- Rhyme scheme;
- The same metric measure per line;
- A complete and self-contained theme in every stanza;
- Equal number of lines in every stanza;
- Cohesion within the stanza and in the whole poem; and
- A form that can be chanted.

The “washairi wa kisasa” or “the modernists” argued that it was not necessary for a poem to have rhyme scheme and meter of the type found in traditional Swahili poetry. They also argued that the rigid rhyme and metre tradition did not emerge as local innovation as claimed by the traditionalists. It came from outside Swahili culture. The observation that the rhyme scheme and metre poetic form is not a local innovation is borne out by the fact that the terms used to talk about the “vina na mizani” (rhyme and metre) poetry are not Kiswahili. Terms such as tathnitha,

tathlitha, tarbia, takhmisa and tasdisa that describe types of poems according to the number of lines per stanza do not to the Kiswahili lexicon of Bantu stock. Little wonder, then, that they do have cognates in Kiswahili's linguistic siblings inhabiting the lands extending from Cape Town in South Africa to Kitale in Kenya. The terms are all borrowed, that is, they have their origin outside the Swahili language and outside the African continent. With all due respect to those who write "ushairi jadi", without batting an eye-lid, I dare say that the rhyme and metre as exhibited in their poetry is a fossil of a Euro-Arabic animal! Why Euro-Arabic? Because of this: Historically, at some point, the form of European poetry and that of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry were joined at the hips. This reality is partly evidenced by sound-meaning correspondence between the English word "metre" and the Arabic word which entered Kiswahili as "mizani". Free verse Kiswahili poetry as composed by this writer and other like him is the authentic and non-imitative art form similar to what the Swahili language had before the arrival of the Arabs on the East African coast and the embracing by the Swahili people of "kustaarabika".

The traditionalists (where "tradition" is best understood in the distorted sense of the Arab influence on the East African coast) have been unable to stop proponents of the free verse (that is, non-imitative) poetry from creating in their preferred mode. Therefore, there has been a de facto victory for the modernists notwithstanding the fact that free verse is still frowned upon in some quarters. Indeed, Kiswahili free verse is yet to make it to some spaces including newspaper columns and television programmes. Those interested in my take on the form in Swahili poetry and in poetry in general can access my views in my two lengthy articles titled "Umbo la Mashairi" and "Utunzi wa Mashairi" at www.marimbapublications.co.ke.

I would like to state, for avoidance of doubt, that I am not saying that there our indigenous languages do not have poems (read songs) that have rhyme; they do. However, the rhyme in such songs is random, sporadic and unpredictable rather than what we find in "ushairi jadi".

Let me turn to the issue of standards in Swahili literature. In an interview with Oumah Otieno, he asked me what I thought of Dr. Siundu's claim that Swahili literature is an underdog on the East African literary scene. Most likely I had read Dr. Siundu's article but I could not remember the details of what I had read and certainly not the issue of Swahili literature being an underdog. However, being familiar with Dr. Siundu's intellectual depth which, I must admit, I admire, I couldn't see him making such a statement. So, I told Mr. Otieno that Dr. Siundu had made was not a claim but rather an observation on people's perception of Swahili literature.

Mr. Otieno's question and Dr. Siundu's observation which provoked the question, raise a fundamental issue of perception with regard to Swahili literature. Some decades ago, at the then Kenya Institute of Education, I was having a chat with a colleague, a literary scholar specializing in East African literature. He confidently told me that he does not read Swahili literature. He went on to say that Swahili literature had pipe-line plots. I did not inquire from him why, if indeed, Swahili fiction and drama had pipe-line plots, he wasn't reading Swahili poetry!

Many years later, I attended an inaugural lecture by my late teacher, Prof Christopher Lukorito Wanjala at the University of Nairobi. The lecture was on East African Literature. In the lecture, my teacher didn't utter a single word on Swahili literature. In the audience was the late Ken Walibora, by then already a prominent Swahili author. At question time, Ken Walibora raised his hand and he was allowed to ask a question. He inquired from Prof. Wanjala why he had said nothing about Swahili literature. Prof. Wanjala responded casually that he was employed to teach literature in English. Well, I am not sure that letters appointing academic staff in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi specify their job description as teaching of literature in English. However, I won't say more on my teacher's lecture especially since he is not around to respond to what I might say.

It is by now clear that some people, including highly trained scholars of literature have, at best, serious doubts on the quality of Swahili literature and, at worst, total contempt for it. To address the issue of quality or complexity – however we want to frame it – of Swahili literature, let me begin with *Al-Inkishafi* which, as I have already indicated, is one of the oldest poems in the language. I have read substantial amount of East African poetry both in Kiswahili and English. *Al-Inkishafi* remains one of my favourite poems. Why? Because of its robust reflection on human life and its sterling use of language. Indeed, not many literary works in East Africa ascend to its aesthetic heights. In the introduction to the J. de V. Allen's translation of the long poem, Ali Mazrui observes that:

Almost by definition, great poetry is untranslatable. Yet, paradoxically, only great poetry is worth *attempting* to translate. Since no two languages carry the same heritage of association and nuance, a poem inevitably loses a great deal of itself as it traverses a linguistic divide. But precisely because a work like *Al - Inkishafi* is a major artistic achievement, the effort to make it available in other tongues must continue.

On his part, J. de V. Allen states that:

Al-Inkishafi is one of the finest poems in Swahili literature. Its worth has long been recognized among Kiswahili speakers. Some literary figures were never without a copy of it in their pockets – as, for example, sayyid Ali Bin Abdalla, uncle of Sayyid Saleh bin Alwi (better known as Habib saleh, the founder of the famous Riyadha Mosque College in Lamu). Others knew the entire poem by heart including Sayyid Masab bin Abdurrahman, also of Lamu, a major poet, jurist, and theologian in the early years of the twentieth century who, we are told, was “in the habit of reciting verses from it during conversations and lectures.

In *Al-Inkishafi*, Sayyid Abdallah bin Nasir illuminates the beguiling nature of life. He lays bare how we get deluded by material wealth and power. In those circumstances, we think we are better than other human beings. That’s all an illusion. Sooner or later, we are pulled from cloud nine to the dusty ground. In sparkling images, the poet writes:

Uwene wangapi watu wakwasi
Walo wakiwaa kama shamsi
Wa muluku zana za adhurusi
Dhahabu na fedha wakhiziniye?

Nyumba zao mbake zikinawiri
kwa taa za kowa na za sufuri
masiku yakele kama nahari
haiba na jaha iwazingile

Pindi walalpo kwa masindizi
Wali na wakandi na wapepezi
Na wake wapambe watumbuizi
Wakitumbuiza wasinyamaye

In spite of their incredibly comfortable life in the past, reality has caught up with such individuals and truly humbled them. In one of the most spectacular hyperboles I have ever encountered in literature, the poet says:

Sasa walalaliye mji shubiri
pasipo zulia wala jodori
ikawa miwili kutaathari
dhiki ya kaburi iwakusiye

that is, they now dwell in a city the size of “shubiri” which is the length between the thumb and the first finger. That’s how small they become!

Finally, savour the following extended metaphor:

Suu ulimwengu bahari tesi
Una matumbawe na mangi masi
Aurakibuo juwa ni mwasi
Kwa khulla khasara khasiriye

Yes! The world is metaphorically likened to a raging sea which the poet calls a quarrelsome sea. The sea in question has coral reefs and all manner of other dangers. My mind easily goes to creatures such as sharks, moray eels and sting rays. In the event of a ship getting wretched by the coral reefs, one tumbles into the water only to come into lethal contact with the creatures. The poet is talking of life in the sense of misguided over-indulgence in power and material wealth. We have a choice to board or not to board the ship of that life. The verb “aurakibuo” used in the third line of the stanza comes from the same root with the noun “merikebu” (ship). Whoever boards the ship is a rebel and every loss comes their way.

Let turn to turn to the quality of Swahili drama. To be honest, some of the early works of drama were of questionable quality. *Afadhali Mchawi* and *Mgeni Karibu*, both by Graham Hyslop, published in 1957, were weak in terms of themes, plot, storyline, characterization, and language use. In them, one even discerns a colonialist bent in the mind of the playwright (Mugambi, 1982). The characters were not well developed and, consequently, not very credible. The two plays lack the strong and well thought out cause-effect element that is a prerequisite for a convincing plot. However, 1957 also saw the publication of Henry Kuria’s *Nakupenda Lakini*, a work that can stand its ground among other plays. Gerishon Ngugi’s *Nimelogwa Nisiwe na*

Mpenzi, whereas not as strong as *Nakupenda Lakini*, was of a much high quality than *Afadhali Mchawi* and *Mgeni Karibu*. After the publication of *Wakati Ukuta* containing two plays, namely, “Wakati Ukuta” and “Alikiona” by Ebrahim Hussein in 1967, the playwright published *Kinjekile*, a play which, its 50-page length notwithstanding, remains one of the finest East African works of drama. Ebrahim Hussein went on to write and publish other respectable plays including the politically and philosophically stimulating *Mashetani*. Since the late 1960s, numerous playwrights working in Swahili have emerged. Some of them such as Penina Mlama, Al-Amin Mazrui, Said Ahmed Mohamed, Emmanuel Mbogo, Kyallo Wadi Wamitilla and Timothy Arege, have written plays that are worthy reading on account the issues they handle and how they handle them.

Let me turn to quality standards in fiction. Since the publication in 1960 of Muhammed Saleh Farsy’s novel, *Kurwa na Doto*, which has been described as a minor classic, Muhammed Said Abdulla’s *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* also published in 1960 and Faraj katalambulla’s crime thriller titled *Simu ya Kifo*, Swahili fiction writers have done well in terms of the quality of their work. We can say without any fear of contradiction that the works of Faraj Katalambulla, Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Said Ahmed Mohamed, Katama Mkangi, Shafi Adam Shafi, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila and Ken Walibora are valuable contributions to the East African fiction.

With the publication of Euphrase Kezilahabi’s *Nagona* and *Mzingile* and then Said Mohamed’s *Babu Alipofufuka* and Kyallo wamitila’s *Bin-Adamu*, Swahili fiction has achieved a level of sophistication never before witnessed in the East African literary scene. The works bring together aspects of reality and elements of magic or the supernatural to inform the characters’ existence and experience. In these works, critics using magical realism as a tool of criticism will have full hands. Looking at these novels, it would not be farfetched to aver that Swahili fiction has, at least in some respects, surged ahead of fiction in English (in East Africa).

Let me address myself to a claim made, rather casually, that Kiswahili literature is didactic. Whenever the claim has been made, there has not been any evidence that a systematic study has been carried out on the issue. Consequently, the claim is uttered as a verbalization of gut feeling rather than a statement emanating from objective analyses of texts. Be that as it may, let us interrogate the meaning of the adjective “didactic”. In their book, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, Peck and Coyle, state that “In every day usage didactic means “teaching a lesson”, (1984:131). Didactic may also be understood to mean “preaching” with the word “preaching” used in a

metaphorical and secular sense. Consequently, when some people say that Kiswahili literature is didactic they most likely mean that writers in the language preach to their readers rather create their works in such a way as to allow the intelligent reader to evaluate what is presented by the writer so as to arrive at a conclusion on the validity, worth and acceptability of the writer's position. Let me respond. First, as I have already indicated, those who have made the claim have not presented any evidence on research that has led to the claim. Second, the claim suffers from generalization. Below, I show why.

It is true that some Kiswahili literary works such as Mwanakupona's *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona*, and Shaaban bin Roberts' *Adili na Nduguze* can be said to be didactic to the extent that they tend to either instruct the reader on what to do or present them with only one path to follow. However, that attribute of the mentioned and similar works should not and cannot be presented as the norm in Kiswahili literature. A lot of other works in the language do not tell you, the reader, or push you, so speak, in an explicitly prescribed direction. They present to you a reasoned position and let you decide how to proceed. Allow me to indulge you. Let me illustrate that Kiswahili literature is not necessarily didactic. Let us look at a composition on environment titled "Mimi, Mto Nairobi" which owes its existence to an interaction between the muse and this presenter's mind:

Mimi, Mto Nairobi

Wananitesa, hawa wajeuri

Majirani bila shukrani!

Wakazi wa jiji

Wananikaba koo

Wananiziba pumzi

Wananinyonga

Kwa mafuta

Kwa mkobo

Kwa tairi

Kwa talimbo

Na takataka bila ukoo

Wenda-wazimu

Wananiangamiza mimi ambaye

Kwa moyo mkunjufu

Niliwakaribisha

Na bila ujira

Bila kinyongo

Nikawahudumia

Kwa maji

Kwa uhai

Majuto

Yanitafuna moyo

Dhiki iliyoje

Tunaishi mtaa mmoja

Na majirani ambao

Asante yao

Ni mateke

Ya punda!

(Wa Mberia,2001:63)

Where, if I may ask, does the composer of this piece instruct the reader on what they so do about pollution of waterways? The composition begins and ends as a lamentation of a waterway. I suppose we hear not some authorial “preaching” but, rather, the anguished voice of the persona who happens to be The Nairobi River. Of course, the poem is not *l’art pour l’art*. It belongs to “engaged literature”. However, I trust that members of the audience and I share the view that “didactic literature” is not a paraphrase for “engaged literature”.

There many Kiswahili poems and works of other genres written with a similar distance between the author and the work. I see nothing that qualifies to be called didactic in works such as “Wanji Wanji” (whose authorship is debatable), Henry Kuria’s *Napenda Lakini*, Mohamed Said

Abdalla's *Kisima cha Giningi*, Ebrahim Hussein's *Mashetani* and *Kinjeketile*, Euphrase Kezilahabi's *Nagona na Mzingile*, as well as in some other recent prose works where authors have experimented with magical realism. The generalization that Kiswahili literature is didactic is invalid and, therefore, untenable.

If the quality of Swahili literature is as good as we have advanced, why then, do Kenyans including literary scholars, tend to assume that serious works and authors are a preserve of literature in English? Why did my late teacher Prof. Christopher Lukorito Wanjala give an inaugural lecture on East African literature and fail to mention anything on Swahili literature? Why does Dr. Siundu get the impression that Kenyan readers consider Swahili literature an underdog as compared to its counterpart in English? Rather than attempting to answer these questions, I elect to ask: Could the answers to these questions be found in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's notion of colonized minds as per his excellent publication titled *Decolonising the Mind* (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). Could we, perhaps, be victims of the same colonization of minds that makes us assume, on a priori grounds, that pizza and pasta are more worthwhile of our bodies than the Dawida *kimanga*, the Kikuyu *mukimo* and the Kamba *muthokio* merely because the former have their origin in European and the latter are African dishes? Could the situation be informed by the "logic" that supports the view that associating Mount Sinai, God, Moses and the Ten Commandments is religion but factoring Mount Kenya in prayers by Kikuyus and Merus is foolish atheism? Isn't a fact, according to the colonized minds' "logic", that anything European or American is better than anything African? Consequently, isn't what is written in a Euro-American language inherently better than what is written in what our mass media refer to as local dialects buying into the racist usage of the otherwise innocent linguistic term "dialect"?

It could well be that Francis Imbuga's play titled *Betrayal in the City* is a more powerful portrayal of Kenya politics than this presenter's play called *Kifo Kisimani*. However, such superiority should not be based on the gut feeling deriving from an assumed ability of European languages to deliver better intellectual products than local languages such as Kiswahili. Perhaps, Okot p'Tek's poetry is more illuminating than that of Muyaka bin Haji or Shaban Robert. However, no one has systematically and objectively demonstrated the fact if, indeed, it is a fact. And if, as someone told me at the then Kenya Institute of Education, some people don't read Swahili fiction because it has pipeline plots, then the claim needs to be validated using the fiction of writers such as Kyallo Wamitila, Kama Mkangi, Tom Olali, Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed, Said Ahmed Mohamed and Euphrase Kezilahabi. It just won't do to continue making disparaging

statements on nothing else other the assumed superiority of things associated with Europe and America, in this case, English.

I have to end my address at this point and yet matters have somewhat thickened over the last couple of minutes. So, what is my parting shot? It is this: Either we embark on a systematic and objective comparative analysis between Swahili literature and its counterpart in English using transparent and verifiable parameters and then, if it be the case, pronounce the superiority of literature in English vis-à-vis its Swahili counterpart or refrain from making comparative statements on Swahili literature on the one hand and literature in English on the other. Scholarship and decency demand of us no less.

Colleagues, ladies and gentleman, I beg to stop at this juncture. Thank you very much for giving me the audience.

ASANTENI SANA NA MUWE NA SIKU NJEMA.

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